

NOTES ON CERTAIN WATER BIRDS IN MASSACHUSETTS.

BY GEORGE H. MACKAY.

THE entire month of March was unusually mild and warm, without storms, southwest and west winds generally prevailing. I do not remember ever having experienced a similar one. I passed through Vineyard Sound on my way to Nantucket Island, Mass., on March 9, 1894; also on my return on the 20th of the same month. On the 28th of April I again made the trip, returning on May 5. I saw but few sea fowl of any description. I was on Muskeget Island, Mass., March 11, remaining until the 18th. Prior to my arrival there had been about two hundred American Eiders (*Somateria dresseri*) living between Muskeget and Tuckernuck Islands, half of which had been killed, and a portion of the remainder driven away, before I arrived. Of these two hundred birds, three quarters were males. This number is less than were sojourning here last year and is undoubtedly owing to the scarcity of shell-fish food in this particular locality. The few birds which remained after my arrival apparently departed on the 16th of March.

During the latter part of February, 1894, about two thousand American Eiders had been living around Cape Poge, Martha's Vineyard, and what is new in my experience, large numbers of them frequented daily the Great Pond on Chappaquidic Island, M. V., to feed. They had undoubtedly observed the large numbers of Scoters which also frequented this pond to feed and followed their example. It may be interesting to know, in this connection, that those Eiders frequenting the north side of Nantucket, also for the first time in numbers, came into the harbor of Nantucket to feed. The cause in both instances was undoubtedly the better food supply. At Woods Holl, Mass., Mr. Vinal Edwards informed me that the American Eiders had again appeared in 1894, as in 1893, in very large numbers during the latter part of the winter, his estimate of their number being between four and five thousand birds, which daily frequented the

waters between Woods Holl and Naushon Island, Mass. On March 13, 1894, during a strong southwest wind, they all departed and were not observed afterwards. Mr. Edwards had saved the contents of the stomachs of some Eiders which were shot on February 11 and 15, which I saw; they consisted of sculpin spawn, in perfect condition, in small masses stuck together, and black mussels (*Modiola modiolus*) ground up to the consistency of fine sand and black in color. Four female King Eiders (*S. spectabilis*) were taken there on February 20, 1894, and the contents of the stomachs saved, which I also saw, consisted entirely of *Tritca trivittata* in good quantity and condition.

Such a very large collection of Eiders, in so restricted a locality as the one above mentioned, can only be explained by the great abundance of the black mussel which these birds first discovered in the winter of 1892-93. These beds of mussels had increased to such an enormous extent that some of them, which were attached one to another, are said to be five feet or more in thickness. Only such masses are able to survive under the peculiar conditions which exist there, due to the great pressure of water which rushes with great force through this narrow passage or strait, connecting Buzzards Bay with Vineyard Sound. When the birds were disturbed by the steamboats which passed daily they would fly out into the Sound, where they would remain awhile, returning later. Although considerably harassed, and many shot, it apparently produced little effect on them, for they refused to forsake so attractive a feeding ground, and continued to frequent it. I have little doubt that they will again appear in the same large numbers if the food supply continues in this locality next season.

No Brant (*Branta bernicla*) wintered around Muskeget Island during the winter of 1893-94. The first that were noted were five birds on February 15, 1894. In less than one week the number increased to fifty, and on March 12 there were between four and five hundred, the larger half of which had come in since March 8. I noticed considerable diminution in the food supply, many acres of the eel grass (*Zostera marina*) having been killed. There was still remaining large areas that was good.

Mr. Marcus W. Dunham of Tuckernuck Island informed me that on May 2, 1893, he saw a good many Red Phalaropes (*Crymophilus fulicarius*) between Muskeget and Tuckernuck Islands.

There have been a good many of the larger Scaup (*Aythya marila nearctica*) living about the waters between Muskeget Island, and Maddeket harbor, which is on the northern side of Nantucket Island. They also frequented the ponds at the western part of the latter island during the winter and spring of 1894, although there have been fewer there than there were last season during the same period. On March 11, 1894, some four hundred still frequented Maddeket harbor. I shot a male and female *A. affinis*, all I saw, on the 13th. They were in company with *A. m. nearctica*. There were still thirty of the larger variety in the Hummuck Pond, Nantucket Island, on April 29. They flew out at my approach, mounted to a very high altitude and went towards the west. I did not see them again.

Although I have shown by these notes that there have been very large bodies of wild fowl concentrated in restricted localities, I would add that I have rarely observed fewer in the localities they have heretofore been accustomed to haunt. I account for it by the scarcity in these localities of the shell-fish food, which they consume in enormous quantities.

I saw about twenty-five Red-breasted Mergansers (*Merganser serrator*) at Muskeget Island March 15, 1894. The height of their abundance in these waters is from April 1 to 10. Those birds which winter further south first make their appearance, a few, about the first of March; they are about all gone by the first week in May.

Six Sanderlings (*Calidris arenaria*) have been living in the vicinity of Muskeget Island, Mass., during the past winter.

Nantucket, winter of 1893-94. There have been about one thousand Scoters living in the upper harbor, coming in from the Sound in the morning to feed, and flying out again in the afternoon to roost. There have also been about one hundred and fifty Brant living in the harbor this spring. On May 1 there were about thirty Brant in Muskeget waters.

Mr. Marcus W. Dunham of Tuckernuck informs me that on May 2, 1893, he saw a flock of fifteen (*Charadrius squatarola*),

the first birds of the season, which were resting on Gravelly Island flats. On May 18 or 20 one hundred or more had collected on Tuckernuck Island and vicinity. They remained about one week. On April 18, 1894, at the westernmost part of Nantucket Island, seven birds were noted flying towards the west. On April 29 I saw two at the south head of the Hummuck Pond. One of them, a male, which I shot, was pretty evenly black and white on the breast; the other had apparently no black. On April 29, 1894, at Billingsgate Lighthouse, Welfleet, Cape Cod, Mass., the keeper, Mr. James P. Smith, saw two Black-bellied Plovers. These are *all* very *early* dates for spring birds in Massachusetts.

There were fewer Turnstones (*Arenaria interpres*) during the spring of 1893 than in 1892; they arrived at the same time as the Black-bellied Plovers, just as they did in the spring of 1892. They are close friends, and frequent the upland with the Plovers, as they do also by themselves.

Mr. H. G. Nutter of Boston, Mass., informs me that on April 15, 1894, he saw seven flocks of American Eiders off Welfleet, Cape Cod, Mass. There were five to seven in each flock. On the 20th he also saw three flocks, with three to five birds each. On April 18 he saw two flocks of Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*), one had twelve birds, the other rather more; they were flying in a northwest direction. On the 21st he saw one flock containing eight birds, which appeared to be very tired. They settled down in Welfleet harbor to rest, it being late in the afternoon.

Seven Canada Geese (*Branta canadensis*) alighted in Ponkapog Pond, Mass., May 8, 1894. I am informed on good authority that more Canada Geese have passed over the eastern part of this State this spring than for many years. This is also the case for Nantucket Island.

There have been fewer Golden-eyes (*Glaucionetta clangula americana*) about Nantucket Island during the past winter than usual.

Through the courtesy of my friend Mr. J. R. Kendall of Jamaica Plain, Mass., I am able to contribute the following interesting data concerning the recent occurrence of the Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus lobatus*) off the coast of Massachusetts. On May 25, 1894, about ten thousand (as carefully estimated)

were observed resting on the water around the 'Pigs' (rocks, lying off Swampscott), occupying an area of about a mile radius. They were feeding on the red whale bait (brit) some of which was taken from them. I am informed that these birds follow the mackerel, which also feed on this brit, by their pursuit of which it is driven to the surface, and is then obtainable by the birds. I am also told that in the Bay of Fundy the Phalaropes so frighten the mackerel when they come to the surface in pursuit of the brit, that the fish sink themselves. To prevent this, the fishermen carry at times quantities of liver cut up, which they throw out to attract these birds and keep them away from the fish in order that they may be better able to capture the latter.

On the above date three hundred and eleven were shot off the 'Pigs,' fifty-six of which were obtained as the result of two discharges. Six of these birds were forwarded to Mr. Tufts, Lynn, Mass., and six others to Mr. Welch of Salem, Mass., both taxidermists. The remainder were not preserved. All of those sent to the above gentlemen proved to be Northern Phalaropes, and were all females. There is every reason for believing that this entire body of birds were of this species. This gathering of birds appears to have been the largest ever noted in this vicinity. I understand they were also observed in large numbers at Annisquam at about the same time.

On May 30, with the wind south and fresh, my friend Mr. J. R. Kendall observed two thousand (estimated) around the 'Pigs,' where they were still lingering, the others having departed. They kept up a continual twittering. He again visited the same locality on June 3, at my request, and sailed over the adjacent water, but failed to observe any birds, all having apparently departed. On that day the wind was west, a fresh breeze. The day before the wind was strong southwest.

I am inclined to the belief that *Phalaropus lobatus*, as also *Crymophilus fulicarius*, exist in enormous numbers, owing to the fact that they seldom approach the shores in numbers, or pass over the land to any extent, as far as I am aware, during their migrations. They consequently are not subject to the contingencies which affect other birds. It will be recalled that a very large flight of Red Phalaropes (see Auk, Vol. IX,

1892, pp. 294-298) occurred in 1892, greater in fact than had heretofore been recorded. None similar has taken place since, so far as I know. Yet one hundred miles north of Cape Hatteras, N. C., and fifty miles from land, Phalaropes abound in countless myriads in May.

STATEN ISLAND CROWS AND THEIR ROOSTS.

BY WILLIAM T. DAVIS.

ABLE-BODIED Crows do not roost on Staten Island in winter, but fly as night approaches to better protected retreats in New Jersey. In ordinary winters five or six hundred visit the island daily, and generally repair to the South Beach where they find a considerable store of food, in the fish, crabs, and other dead creatures that are cast ashore. As the afternoon wears away, the Crows fly westerly from the beach, and congregate on the salt meadows along Fresh Kill, on the opposite side of the island. If these meadows are covered with snow, they assemble in the trees, or in some upland field, which is more likely to be bare. Here, with additions to their number from other parts of the island, they hold a convention, and gradually, by twos and by threes, and in small flocks, fly either along the Kill out to the Sound, or diagonally across Long Neck to New Jersey, to a roost that lies north or northwest of Staten Island.

Many afternoons have been spent in watching the Crows at Long Neck and elsewhere on the island, and a few specific observations will be offered as evidence here, though a more detailed account is to be found in the Proceedings of the Natural Science Association of Staten Island, for May 12, 1894.

Sunday, December 24, and Christmas day, 1893, were both very mild; there was a warm wind and no snow on the ground. On these occasions several hundred Crows gathered on the salt meadows in the afternoon, near the head of the main branch of